



Is the War Economy a Response to the “Mal Francais”?

Laurent Tournois*

Department of Post graduate Studies, Singidinum University, Serbia

ABSTRACT

This paper starts from the premise that the election of Emmanuel Macron was no accident. It was deeply embedded in a French cultural characteristic that is the search for a providential man, an authoritarian paternalist figure who promised to “bring France back on track” and preserve individuals material comfort. Progressively, as the politics conducted since 2017 led to a dead end, masks have fallen, thus revealing that Emmanuel Macron symbolizes the new French elite disconnected from real life and whose ultimate avatar is his incarnation as a warlord definitively signalling the end of an era of negotiation, cooperation, and civic mindedness. This article aims to set out and analyse the key elements of this dynamic from the original angle of Mal francais, merging outdated economic frameworks, culturally ethnocentric assumptions and focalization on past splendor, which will culminate in the premises of an entry into a “war economy”.

Keywords: Mal francais; War economy; Militarization of politics; Politics of enmity; Psychological condition; Memory activism; Emmanuel Macron; France

INTRODUCTION

“Times of misfortune breed a singular race of men who flourish only in storm and turmoil” [1].

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 was no accident. Between the hyperactivity and peopolization of the office personified by Nicolas Sarkozy and the ‘limp presidency’ of François Hollande, the French were expressing a demand for political renewal, embodied by a charismatic man capable of bringing a fresh perspective to the country’s situation. While rejecting the extremes, they chose Emmanuel Macron for his “transformative” boldness and his political “en meme temps” both offering an imperfect but seductive response to voters disillusioned with the left right divide and implicitly promising to resolve the “quasi existential crisis of the French political model” [2].

Emmanuel Macron came to symbolize the providential man, the “progressive bearer of a project of both the right and the left,” in which the state played a central role in France’s adaptation to a globalized economy and changing capitalism, and whose destiny was inseparable from that of Europe [3].

Initially presenting himself in the guise of a “new Prince” inspired by the Florentine thinker Nicolas Machiavelli, of whom he is a fervent admirer, Emmanuel Macron has sought, particularly since the Yellow vests/Gilets jaunes crisis, to create a strong power designed to ensure social peace. To the initial objective of determining the best way to take power to support a globalist-Europeanist project, will be added that of retaining it “whatever it takes,” a rhetorical figure that the President invented during the management of the pandemic, and which goes far beyond the framework of a health policy.

Neither the country’s recovery nor the personal situation of most French people, this ‘temptation of the savior’, this need for authority associated with a fascination for past greatness masks a much deeper evil, a Mal francais which, unresolved and exploited, will lead to a totalitarian drift rooted in a legitimacy that is first recognized and then finally contested [4]. This ‘recurring figure in the French political imagination’ will see his mask fall off, revealing the true nature of the regime in place: Neither belonging to the aristocracy nor descended from a line of captains of industry, Emmanuel Macron irrevocably represents the new French elite, whose ultimate avatar is the incarnation as a warlord definitively signaling the end of an era

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Corresponding author Laurent Tournois, Department of Post graduate Studies, Singidinum University, Serbia, E-mail: laurent.tournois@proton.me

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FROM MISDIAGNOSIS TO THE ‘MAL FRANÇAIS’

Perhaps this is the true nature of Mal français a misdiagnosis and culturally ethnocentric intellectual assumptions that have weighed on the conduct of politics since the 1970s, combined with an excessive focus on past splendor that prevents any transformation.

The outbreak of the oil crisis that was to mark the 1970s and change the paradigms of the post-war economy was both an economic and an intellectual shock, linked to the belated awareness that the post-war boom years were coming to an end and that a new development model needed to be invented. In *Le Mal français*, a political and sociological essay published at the end of 1976 that was a huge bestseller, Alain Peyrefitte said with regret: “When I wrote *Le Mal français*, I felt the need to take stock. Twice I had been unable to bring to fruition a reform that had been meticulously prepared, in May 1968 at the Ministry of Education and in 1973 at the Ministry of Administrative Reform”. “Encouraging our compatriots to cure the disease that is in our heads as French people: I in no way claim to have succeeded. Will it ever be possible? The work remains to be done. That’s why, my dear reader, don’t close this book like a satisfied consumer. Don’t fall back on the possible pleasure of having understood a little better. Speak, write and act” [5]. Above all, perhaps, as General de Gaulle’s former minister pointed out, “The evil is in the minds”.

First of all, in the 1970s, the French school of regulation based on a neo-institutional approach to the economy was dominant. Unfortunately, the analytical framework provided by this school of thought made it impossible to establish a relevant diagnosis, because the underlying model looked to the past, seeking out the institutional configuration that had made it possible to overcome past crises while neglecting exogenous negative factors. Unable to analyse the consequences of the oil shocks, it confined itself to reproducing the regularities of the Thirty Glorious (1945-1975) while this growth regime was coming to an end [6]. Furthermore, the reading grids in use did not allow understanding that this phase of growth was without precedent and therefore atypical of the long and varied history of capitalism [7]. Subsequently, the neo-liberal development model, all other things being equal, forced countries to give priority to national competitiveness, which gradually led to increasingly aggressive multi-point competition between states which, as pockets of growth or profit zones declined, resulted in a zero-sum game and its many contemporary avatars, such as the predation of resources and “crony capitalism”.

It was from this period (the mid-1970s) that the ‘French stall’ began, which almost inevitably linked economic dynamics (the transformation of democratic capitalism into a crisis) and war in a virtually literal implementation of Wolfgang Streeck’s observation [8,9]. The link between capitalism and crisis, at first poorly understood from a fundamental point of view, will end up being instrumentalized to ‘buy time’, thus inexpensively

making it possible to repeat the narrative pattern which consists of considering that political institutions define the rules of the game (and shape the preferences of the actors, a legacy of the School of Regulation) and thus have an impact on outcomes, which are no longer at the service of the collective good but of the financial markets, leading to a denial of the founding principles of the neoliberal development model, which are, on a planet-wide scale, social and material wellbeing [10]. In addition, from the initial postulate of influencing social actors and processes through stimulation and redistribution, institutions will evolve and use other means, such as constraint and coercion.

AN ENDURING EVIL LEADING TO A DEAD-END

The clinical observation of France’s decline would be repeated in the wake of Jacques Chirac’s resounding victory over the far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, leading successive leaders of the right and left to be accused of being “united by a common talent for winning elections and making France lose” [11]. While the economic and social situation is incomparable, the current period shares the same common trait that of a questioning of the elites who govern France and their refusal to see in the crisis the power for transformation that it conceals.

Putting an end to the *Mal français* would have meant considering that a crisis constitutes a potential moment of change provided that the real is brought closer to the ideal. Decline occurs when there is asymmetry; the movement of oscillation between tension and rupture is blocked and skewed by moralism and cynicism or even contempt [12]. When Emmanuel Macron was elected, four decades had passed on *Le Mal français*, and the evil that this classic of political thought highlights is still present: It is like a mirror in which the ruling French elite can look at itself. Faced with the existential challenges coping with France, Emmanuel Macron embodied himself as a progressive, a territory left vacant by his predecessors, and intended to trigger a paradigm shift whose foundation was to reunite hierarchical social universes to forge a common repertoire [4]. At a press conference on 25 April 2019, Emmanuel Macron took up the concept of “inclusive patriotism”: “What we need to do is rebuild an inclusive patriotism in which everyone plays their part, in which the French and European general interest is basically reaffirmed but is not simply the sum of individual interests.” [13]. Was it a question of countering a “patriotism of exclusion”, meaning that there was a multi-ethnic dimension to the message, or was it a call to all sections of society to make an effort? In reality, this formula symbolized not a break with the past but a ‘neoliberal revisionism’ for ‘the good of all’, a lexical device used to divert a value from its meaning and make it lose its substance [14].

Basically, Macronism was defined to hide the fact that there was nothing universal or humanist about Emmanuel Macron’s project for society. The *Gilets jaunes* movement revealed its true nature, very far from inclusiveness and much closer to an Ancient Regime society that would endure in a new form, crony capitalism (Emmanuel Macron being dubbed the “president of the rich”) with privileges, exclusivities, and exclusions symbolizing the definitive cleavage between the people and

the elites. We should remember the phrase uttered by the President on 29 June 2017: “A railway station is a place where you meet people who succeed and people who are nothing”, which already represented the presidential ‘class contempt’ for all those who had not jumped on the bandwagon of progress [15].

Furthermore, the disappearance of political parties in favor of political movements (such as La République en Marche the party created ex-nihilo by Emmanuel Macron) built around a more or less charismatic leader poses a problem because their objective is rarely to begin a real transition [6]. If there was a ‘disruption’, it was above all that of a generational break in the political elites with the arrival of Nicolas Sarkozy in power in 2007, followed by a coupling of French foreign policy to that of the United States which limited the field of possibilities and accelerated France’s decline. From the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy to that of Emmanuel Macron, successive governments have shared a common trait: A strategic vacuum. If there were only one formal witness to the absence of strategy since the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017, it would be the Vision of France 2030. It summarizes all the ills from which France suffers and which Emmanuel Macron will not only has failed to resolve but, above all, has exacerbated. More than just a Mal français, the “ideological vacuum” of 2017 that enabled his accession to power had its corollary: A strategic vacuum. More than a decade ago, management science researchers warned of the impasse into which the succession of crises since 2008 had led strategic thinking. The main characteristics of this “strategic vacuum”, as Baumard and Bauer have termed it, are that it has replaced the art of strategy with that of tactics and that it practices an exaggerated cult of calculation (to the detriment of the search for a balance with meditative thinking), which ultimately prevents from thinking about the future and limits the political establishment to control the present [16]. This observation would lead the political scientist Jean Petaux to declare, “I wonder if the campaign didn’t start as early as 2017 with the election of Emmanuel Macron”; “In a way all the same, Emmanuel Macron’s five-year term is a permanent political campaign” [17].

The French development model, therefore, has remained in a state of permanent tension, without ever reaching the stage of a creative, transformative break, thus perpetuating the phase of decline that began several decades ago. Firstly, by 2022, France’s export competitiveness indicators have deteriorated further by 2021, returning to two of the characteristics of the decline that began in the 2000s: Losses in export market share that go hand in hand with the relative decline in industry, and a decline in market share that concerns virtually all categories of manufactured products [18]. Secondly, France’s modernization through globalization and its embodiment in hypermodern forms of consumption has contributed to a decline in the sense of belonging to a large collective in favor of the communitarianization of society, and even isolation and loneliness. In this respect, socio-economic indicators illustrate the political failure to develop a more inclusive society. In terms of the employment rate for men aged 15-64, France underperforms the OECD average (France 71 vs. 77 OECD average) [19]. While it was already a cause for concern in the early 2000s, the trend in poverty has become a symbol of

the impasse reached by successive governments. According to a document published by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) on 14 November 2023, almost 14.5% of the population now lives below the poverty line, a figure unseen since 1996, when INSEE began measuring this indicator; to put it plainly, there have not been so many poor people in France for 25 years. Finally, since the start of Emmanuel Macron’s presidency, inequalities in living standards have increased, with the Gini index rising from 0.28 in 2016 to 0.294 in 2021 [20].

To a certain extent, and to paraphrase Charles Gardou, this enduring Mal français has transformed French society into a “club whose members could monopolize the social heritage for their exclusive enjoyment. Nor is it a circle reserved for certain members, busy collecting subsidies attached to a ‘normality’ conceived and experienced as sovereign” [21]. So that this system itself can endure, Emmanuel Macron has, from his genesis as a presidential candidate, made the permanent creation of disruption his motto in terms of governance, disguised under the term “disruption” and whose ultimate form of expression is the promulgation of the decree of 9 June 2024 dissolving the National Assembly. In essence, one does not adapt to the new global disorder by producing “order”, but by creating more disorder [22]. Thus, the policy pursued since 2017 has been based on the creation of permanent power relations and rivalries designed to contain the socioeconomic shock. The balance of power (initially repressive before becoming ‘military’) has taken precedence over political negotiation.

FRANCE’S GRADUAL TRANSITION TO A WAR ECONOMY

The Militarization of Politics

Symbolically, the fall of the Berlin Wall and with it that of the great ideological conflicts had given way to almost 3 decades of relatively shared growth. It has now been replaced by intolerance, the rejection of compromise, the subordination of democracy to financial interests, and indiscriminate, dogmatic accommodation, the intellectual dimension of which today boils down to unhealthy propaganda in which discussion and contradictory argumentation are banished [23].

Inspired by the United States, it was at the end of the Gilets jaunes crisis that Emmanuel Macron laid the explicit foundations of a form of neoconservatism “a la française”, which would have provided a solution to the crisis of neoliberalism by amending how public support for a program so resolutely contrary to its interests was manufactured [24]. It was the Covid-19 crisis that marked the real ‘outbreak of war’, with the President multiplying his ‘health defense councils’, endlessly repeating “We are at war” and calling for ‘general mobilization’ against an ‘invisible, elusive enemy’ [25]. This period heralded a new model of economic development, based on the structural principle that the economy enables war and war affects the economy [26]. The health crisis thus reorganized the collective system of values according to a hierarchical order temporarily managed by the public authorities [27]. In short, the introduction of a ‘health war economy’ confirmed the fusion

of health and economic values, while weakening the State by reducing it to a mere repressive apparatus.

In 2024, as the Russo-Ukrainian conflict enters its third year, the geopolitical and domestic context is 'favorable' to France's entry into a 'war economy'. The situation, as described by the essayist David Baverez, has familiar features that have been encountered in the past, whether in the 1930s with the rise in wealth inequalities and/or in the 1970s with the energy crisis, which today represents around 3% of GDP, to which contemporary factors such as a democratic and societal crisis and a public debt crisis have been added [28]. What is more surprising is the advice given: Instead of opposing it, he suggests adapting to it, since history has been confronted with it from time to time. Indeed, if you take a modicum of interest in history, it is easy to see that, without going into a detailed analysis of the legislative and regulatory measures taken for the economic conduct of the war, there is no evidence today of "the nation's profound desire for peace", the "desire for peace" that distinguished France from Germany in 1940 [29]. This type of historical-intellectual posture forms the basis of a new politics of enmity.

Politics of Enmity

"We have first to envision the destruction of the enemy in our minds" [30].

Since 2017, the socio-political face of France, combining processes of cleavage, exaggeration, polarization, and rigidification of the capacity to differentiate, has the necessary features to shape enmity [31]. However, the absence of direct aggression by a third country (namely Russia) towards France does not allow the legal factors justifying a response to be mobilized. Insofar as there is no feeling of anger, no thought of revenge, no act of aggression, or even an intention to inflict harm on another [France], the aggression must therefore be defined by proxy (Ukraine), integrated into a wider spatial framework (Europe) and unilateral [32]. The aim is consequently to stimulate or even build an aggressive mental disposition by instilling in the population a sense of (imminent) danger, so as to erase individual differences in terms of preparedness to support military ventures.

Theoretically, as Volkan put it, a "large group under stress seeks a savior to shore up the group's identity and protect the group from anxiety-provoking threats" [33]. In the case of France, there is no proven threat either to its identity or to its national borders because there is no direct interaction. The providential man, as embodied by Emmanuel Macron, must therefore create an enemy to give substance (or rather a face) to the crisis: it is Russia. As such he first deconstructs then reconstructs security discourses on grounds of a fictional territorial exclusion not at the national but the European level.

Here enmity is conceptualized less in terms of economic rivalry than in terms of political enmity. Contradictory in its foundations, this approach does not imply the conduct of national identity politics that theoretically continues to operate based on the friend-enemy distinction [34]. However, in the Macronian approach, the logic of economic competitiveness and the logic of political enmity coexist, and the 'survival of the state', reduced here to the political survival

of the incumbent president, is understood as a question of economic competitiveness and less of military power. Thus, the articulation of the Us vs. them relationship, contradictory in nature in the case of France, is played out in the context of the Western paradigm (in the sense of being dominated and constrained by the United States) of the global market. In so doing, Emmanuel Macron, through his understanding of and commitment to international politics, transgresses.

1) 'Liberal' universalism and moves closer to Carl Schmitt's concept of the political that is not linked to the existence of the state [35]

2) The humanist socialism that he claimed during the 2016/2017 presidential campaign, and which had enabled him to recapture the left-wing electorate.

In the absence of concrete evidence (it simply doesn't exist), the narrative scheme employed borrows from the 'thesis novel', which is based on a preconceived idea that the hero expresses with a certain amount of Manichaeism, the ultimate aim being to reactivate ideological stereotypes and exert his authority over the reader through the narration of an exemplary attitude, based on or generating a hierarchical value system [36]. This form of narrative also conceals an equivocal dimension that is specific to Macron's logic: Passing the responsibility for his decisions onto others, whether it be the unemployed or more generally the "refractory Gauls" who block any attempt at transformation, before gradually shifting the blame onto a foreign country and its ruling elite. In 2022, Emmanuel Macron did not want to "humiliate Russia", whereas today he says he is ready to consider "all options" in the face of "the stubbornness of the Russian President"; it was this change of direction that he clarified during a prime-time television interview in which he hammered home: "Russia must not win" [37].

PROPAGANDA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONING

Scholarly studies in political psychology shed light on the processes at work. Already tried and tested during the Covid-19 crisis, and faithful to the principle of psychological organization of the nation in "wartime", the aim of which is to give the population a "feeling of security", Emmanuel Macron relies on media (the LCI channel, blogs from the military circle, advertising spots for the armed forces) and intellectual (the Institut d'études politiques de Paris and various "experts from the TV studios") relays that support the government with the aim of manufacturing consent through a fictional crisis [38]. In addition, it comes to inscribe in the mental map of the population the notion of sacrifice, hoping to find fertile ground among individuals belonging to Generation Z.

First of all, the introduction of a war economy meant the urgent establishment of an economy run by the state in an almost authoritarian fashion [39]. Some of these principles can be found in the recent statements made by the Minister for the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, when Renault signed an agreement to facilitate the mobilization of army reservists, calling for "a form of patriotism on the part of French capitalism" [40].

Secondly, since he began campaigning in 2016, an examination

of the French President's lexical field is instructive in terms of the militarization of the political game. During his traditional "rendez-vous with the nation" in January 2024, the Head of State not only sought to re-establish his authority but above all advocated "civic rearmament" and launched a "call for the sacrifice of the people" to psychologically prepare young people (aged 18-25) for an "inescapable" national mobilization [41].

Furthermore, although national service was suspended in 1997 following Jacques Chirac's decision to professionalize the armed forces, a sociological study carried out on "young people and war" shows a marked "revival of patriotism" among young people who are more inclined to sign up and less anti-militarist sentiment than among their elders [42].

Although the results show a rather nuanced picture, the Macronian cognitivism/constructivism dialectic has no hesitation in believing that there is a "revival of patriotism" among young French people or that they seem ready to go to war if necessary. The aim, which is to channel the need for commitment towards a patriotic attitude that would materialize, if necessary, through participation in the war in Ukraine, is based on the hypothesis of a bicausal relationship between participation and patriotism [43]. On the one hand, it is clear that this is a forced or even fabricated image, and one can legitimately wonder whether it is not more a question of a need for commitment, for "feeling useful", which responds to an existential void in Generation Z than to concrete action and, above all, a real awareness of the contingencies of war. On the other hand, defensive patriotism is logically more active among non-commissioned soldiers who are preparing to be sent into all types of terrain (urban areas, use of drones), in response to Emmanuel Macron's "Nothing must be excluded" regarding the sending of ground troops to Ukraine [44].

EMMANUEL MACRON AS "AGENT OF MEMORY"

Gradually, there emerged an implicit desire to reconcile the French with themselves by setting them a common goal, namely "the Russian enemy" and, more generally, anything that did not uphold European values.

Emmanuel Macron's transformative governance is characterized not only by a continuous staging of reality but also of history, the aim being to combine institutional efficiency (including economic efficiency, whereas his governance since 2017 has been the antithesis of this) and awareness of the reality of the "civilizational crisis" through which the country is passing and, more recently, its transformation into a "war". Faced with the President's inability to resonate with the everyday lives of the majority of French people, and to fill a certain existential void inherent in a liberal model in crisis, he has invented a role for himself, a commemorative fiction that culminated in the Sorbonne speech of April 25, 2024. While the deconstructionist nature of his policy has been emphasized on several occasions, Emmanuel Macron has become an "agent of memory" whose job is to transform an event into a collective trauma and use commemorations to (re)build social capital through shared social memory, while at the same time transferring responsibility to the population, even going so

far as to make them feel guilty if they refuse to support his warmongering stance [45].

Like a "necessary return to our origins", the increasing number of national tributes and commemorations has the feel of Greek tragedy. As someone who has had a passion for theatre since his teens, it is not surprising that Emmanuel Macron has seized upon the commemorations to breathe concrete life into them on stage because he experiences the experience as a manifestation of the ever-renewed topicality of tragic conflict [46]. From a former theatre of fighting between Resistance fighters, the German army, and the French militia, to the Maison d'Izieu where 44 children and seven teachers, all Jewish, were rounded up on 6 April 1944 and then deported, to the tribute paid to the West Indian novelist and humanist activist Maryse Condé, the President has made the "tendency to exalt heroic figures" a strong marker of his second term in office, aligned with the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

As part of this "embodiment of the Nation by delegation", commemorations offer metanarratives that are essential to the reconstruction of national unity. While they are most often rooted in traumatic events that involve large-scale force and violence, the Macronian en-meme-temps incorporate life stories from popular culture, without partisan/political distinction. From Napoleon Bonaparte to Georges Pompidou, cultural figures such as Charles Aznavour and Jean-Paul Belmondo, resistance fighters Léon Gautier and Missak Manouchian, former European Commission President Jacques Delors, Simone Veil, Joséphine Baker and feminist lawyer Gisèle Halimi, the father of the abolition of the death penalty, Robert Badinter, and everyday 'heroes' such as the gendarme Arnaud Beltrame, all serve to resonate with the present of a population that is not only fractured but, above all, the vast majority of whom reject him, by celebrating values that are meant to be transcendent, i.e. modern, conquering and a refusal of 'defeatism'. At the launch of the ceremonies to mark the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings, he praised the "spirit of sacrifice" of France's liberators, adding: "I know that our country has a daring and valiant youth, ready for the same spirit of sacrifice as its elders" [47].

However, the implicit warning in the President's rhetoric is not about French society but about the supranational entity that is Europe. The crucial moment came in his speech at the Sorbonne, in which he called for "a Europe of 'power', 'prosperity' and 'humanism'" and warned: "We must be clear about the fact that our Europe today is mortal. It can die. It can die, and that depends solely on our choices" [48]. The message is aimed above all at the younger generations, those with fewer civic links, commending them to assume the responsibilities of their elders while urging them "not to make the same mistakes".

In Macron's logic, their futures are linked, even subordinate: Europe first, then France, with the former able to endure only if each generation inherits the memories of the past while creating its own future: "Our European future, which is by definition the future of France", explained Emmanuel Macron by way of introduction. "The future of France and that of Europe are indissociable", he insisted [49].

This discourse, with its hegemonic overtones, is inspired by republican universalism and at the same time emancipates

itself from the idea of the French nation, even though the two are indissociable [50]. During this ‘memorial frenzy’, Emmanuel Macron amalgamates the French nation and European civilization and tries to establish a collective human and moral sense that cannot be common to these levels of aggregation. While he feels invested in a historical mission, his ‘sacralisation’ of Europe lacks passion, not least because civilization is a concept that aims at a general rationalization of reality [51]. Emmanuel Macron’s understanding of the notion of civilization is therefore both literal and specific, bordering on idealization; he ‘thinks’ European civilization in such a way as to retrace and interpret its history, and then applies it in a privileged way to a broad geographical area of the human collective, while excluding a country such as Russia.

DISCUSSION

“Since wars are born in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that we must build the ramparts of peace [30].”

The French have waited a long time for the “enlightened prince” that Emmanuel Macron is vainly trying to embody. Except that today, between incapacity, renunciation of republican values, and blindness, the interlocking facts represent a danger for the present and the future of France. It is the economic and social constraints, and beyond that the loss of autonomy in strategic decisions (the latter being understood here as “a problem of resource allocation that has a lasting impact on the future of a country”) that have turned dichotomies into a pathology and led to enmity. The absence of this ability to differentiate (which we might call the critical spirit), which is nonetheless essential to the survival of any species, has led to a polarized vision of the world, in terms of good-evil, safe-dangerous. In this framework, ‘good’ is always associated with ‘Us’ (Europe, France) and ‘Them’ (‘not Us’ that are Russia and ‘non-democratic’ regimes among others). Gradually, “Them”, those who are different from Us, this “Us” being Europe as explained by Emmanuel Macron in his Sorbonne speech, becomes the feared and hated “enemy” who “must not win” so that “we” can feel safe.

The extension of the concept of defense to all aspects of national policy (economic, social, health, etc.) was discussed and even criticized in the 1970s [52]. Emmanuel Macron is not part of this trend of thought and is breaking with several traditions. First of all, while he borrows a direct tone and a certain frankness from General de Gaulle, he distances himself completely from him by taking the view that (French) foreign policy is not the expression of the nation on the international stage but of Europe, which he sees as the new sociological reality [53]. Secondly, he opposes the theory of the indirect approach formulated by Basil Liddell Hart in 1929, according to which victory can be achieved through limited indirect actions (using the psychological factor in particular) that destabilize the enemy, rather than through simple direct confrontation, which appears to be the living testimony of a strategic vacuum [54,55]. Finally, the Aristotelian tradition, which is based on public debate on questions of justice and injustice, is a transgression that began with the management of the pandemic. It is interesting to note that the administration of the United States broke with this tradition in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. But France’s current

situation is in no way equivalent to that faced by America in 2001, which makes the situation even more worrying insofar as the executive is seeking to free itself from international law and multinational commitments in diplomatic terms by validating its decisions through the demonization of its enemies, namely Russia [56].

However, inspired by the American policy of self-affirmation implemented after 11 September 2001, Emmanuel Macron has made Europe’s survival a moral absolute in a process that was already denounced by Carl Schmitt, a supporter of a strong state and a healthy liberal economy that had to be protected from the repeated assaults of interest groups [57,58]. The latter condemned the idea of waging war for profit and recognized that such wars are often disguised as moral crusades waged against the “inhuman” [56], the stripping of enemies of their humanity then preventing any dialogue and encouraging escalation.

Does this mean we should blame Emmanuel Macron for the ills that France is suffering from?

For some observers, the election of Emmanuel Macron represented the bringing into line of the political offer with France’s socio-economic landscape: An almost-unknown man, younger than all the presidents who preceded him, who had never held an elective office, whose experience and abilities to govern were unknown, acceded to the presidency, like the mirror of a polarized, fragmented society seeking its salvation in a father figure. Civil society and the political opposition are largely responsible for this since Emmanuel Macron has been elected twice.

First of all, there is a significant cultural factor. If we look at Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, it can be noticed that, compared with Germany and the United States, France scores higher in Power Distance. In other words, children are brought up to be emotionally dependent, and this dependence is transferred from parents to, and later on to, superiors. The corollary of this mental disposition is that French society accepts a certain degree of inequality materialized, among other things, by a strong centralization of power (The Culture Group, 2024). In times of crisis, whether real or fictional, it is therefore not surprising to find, through characters such as General De Gaulle or Marshal Pétain, the embodiment of a need for authority, and even a form of veneration for the person who will personify the figure of the patriotic hero and/or savior.

Acceptance of this degree of inequality would find its breaking point during the Gilets jaunes crisis. However, under the dual effect of disproportionate repression (as was highlighted by NGOs such as Amnesty International) and definite selfishness in terms of refusing to sacrifice their material well-being as a symbol of a “bourgeois comfort” dating back to the 19th century [59]. Majority of French people have agreed to give up their freedom on the altar of the health crisis, in a higher form of voluntary servitude imposed by fear that will be contested by another part of the population [60].

As far back as 2002, the theme of France’s decline dominated public debate, leading observers to conclude that “all that was needed to get the country out of the rut was a project

supported by a more courageous and imaginative ruling class” while suggesting that “the French problem today may go beyond that of the political capacity of the ruling elites” [61]. While the social consequences (disintegration of the ‘living together’, withdrawal into oneself, communitarianism, in terms of safeguarding industrial interests (loss of competitiveness) and governance by proxy (over-solicitation of consulting firms), particularly during the pandemic, were dramatic, very few elected representatives have denounced the growing influence of business circles and conflicts of interest at the highest levels of government since 2014 [62]. This is perhaps one of the many facets of the *Mal français*: The tacit acceptance that the enrichment of some is (henceforth) at the expense of others.

The 20 years that followed were characterized by a convergence of the various political forces in terms of an ideological vacuum and a dictatorship of short-termism, over and above the gradual disappearance of career politicians. Such phenomenon materialized during the *Gilets jaunes* episode, then during the Covid-19 pandemic, the mode of governance by ordinance at the start of Emmanuel Macron’s second term, and then during the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, by the absence of counter-discourse calling for de-escalation except among sovereigntists. This situation should come as no surprise, given that only 80 out of 569 members of parliament opposed the draft revision of the Constitution in the vote of 10 July 1940 [63].

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, no major political force has intervened, even if only verbally, in the “diabolical process” of creating an enemy, namely Russia, even though non-violent conflict resolution is one of the most urgent tasks of the nuclear age [30]. In May 2024, at the time of the European elections, although the theme of ‘war’ was absent from the electoral debate, it was civil society that finally took it up through petitions, urging the opposition, in particular the *Rassemblement National*, to take account of the fact that 76% of French people were against sending French ground troops to Ukraine [64]. In light of the early parliamentary elections on 30 June 2024, it is unlikely that any political force will take a clear stance against escalation and the construction of an artificial co-belligerency sought by Emmanuel Macron. This was probably the last opportunity to form alternative geopolitics or conduct of de-escalation, a *nomos* (necessarily democratic) in Annah Arendt’s sense that embraces contract and promise [65].

CONCLUSION

The combination of internal French and geopolitical factors makes the current situation at the same time unprecedented and ‘exceptional’ in the sense of that in which France found itself in June 1940: Competing political forces but which are part of the continuity of the previous regime, both because they express a rejection of it, but also because they anticipate subsequent developments that have led to the ‘death of the Republic’.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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